

**STATEMENT OF
MARY WAGNER, ASSOCIATE CHIEF
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
REGARDING
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FEE AUTHORITY ON FEDERAL LANDS
SEPTEMBER 17, 2015**

Chairman Murkowski and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA). I am Mary Wagner, Associate Chief of the Forest Service, testifying today on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

REA AND RECREATION

The authorities in REA are valuable tools that allow us to improve recreational facilities and provide quality visitor experiences across National Forest System (NFS) lands. Through REA, the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) agencies are able to invest in upkeep and improvements at sites that millions of visitors use and enjoy. Through our collective missions, we provide the American public and visitors from around the world with outstanding recreation opportunities on federal lands.

REA has been extended multiple times and is now set to expire September 30, 2016. The extensions have allowed the Forest Service and DOI agencies to proceed with normal operations without any impact on the public or our partners. They have also allowed time to continue valuable discussions on enhancing the visitor experience and identify ways to continue to deliver high-quality recreation services on federal lands.

The National Forests and Grasslands provide some of the greatest outdoor recreation opportunities in the world, connecting people with nature in an incredible variety of settings and activities. Each year approximately 147 million visitors hike, cycle, ride horses, and drive off-highway vehicles on these lands. They picnic, camp, hunt, fish, enjoy recreational shooting, and navigate waterways. They view wildlife and scenery and explore historic places. They glide through powder at world-class alpine ski resorts and challenge themselves on primitive cross-country ski or over-snow vehicle routes. These recreation opportunities contribute about \$10.3 billion to the nation's gross domestic product each year and support approximately 143,000 jobs. Many of these jobs are located in rural communities and are associated with numerous outdoor industries and small businesses.¹

We constantly strive to enhance the experience of visitors to NFS lands by maintaining high-quality recreational facilities and programs. To achieve this, we rely on five principal sources of support: (1) appropriated funding, (2) recreation fees authorized under REA, (3) private service providers such as concessioners and outfitters and guides, (4) partnerships, and (5) volunteers.

¹ Statistics are from the 2014 National Visitor Use Monitoring Report, USDA Forest Service.

REA authorizes the federal land management agencies to retain and reinvest funds received at recreation sites or areas that meet the criteria for charging recreation fees enumerated in the law, as well as the authority to retain and reinvest special use permit fees for outfitters and guides and recreation events, which helps promote small businesses.

Recreation opportunities on NFS lands range from highly developed sites to dispersed recreation in undeveloped areas that are available to the public free of charge. Approximately 98 percent of NFS lands have dispersed recreation opportunities that range from camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, and much more. There are approximately 27,000 recreation sites on NFS lands, 78 percent of which are not subject to a recreation fee. Of the 27,000 sites, approximately 3800 are subject to fees charged under REA, and 2,300, such as concession campgrounds, are subject to fees charged under another authority. Most of these 6,100 fee sites are campgrounds and cabin rentals, but they also include developed boat launches, picnic sites, off-road vehicle staging areas, swimming areas, developed recreation sites at trailheads, target ranges, and other developed recreation sites and areas.

Fee retention provides an immediate, stable, and flexible source of funding that has been and continues to be a fundamental component of a sustainable funding model, which is especially critical today when 52% of the Forest Service's budget is devoted to fire suppression resulting in reductions to all other Forest Service activities including recreation and facilities maintenance. In addition, REA revenues leverage other sources of funding, including funds from grants and work performed by volunteers. Funding collected through REA, which can be retained and reinvested at the sites where it is collected, is vastly different from funding received through appropriations. Besides being predictable and subject to obligation for future years, funding collected through REA is available for any operation, maintenance, and improvement costs at recreation fee sites. Funding received from visitor fees is thus an investment by the visitor in the sites they use. The vast majority of this funding, 80 to 95 percent is reinvested directly into the same recreation fee sites where the visitors' fees were paid.

Most recreation fee revenues are used to provide recreational services and amenities to the public, such as repair and replacement of deteriorated facilities like campsites, restrooms, picnic tables, and trails. Recreation fee revenue also are used to improve visitor centers, water and sewer systems, corrals, cabins, remote camps used by outfitters and guides, boat launches, and swimming areas. Recreation fee revenues are used for installation of recycling, solar, and other environmentally sustainable facilities, and removal of huge volumes of trash and graffiti, non-native and invasive plants, and hazard trees at recreation sites.

Over the past several years, the Forest Service has collected approximately \$66 million in recreation fee revenues annually, an estimated 20 to 25 percent of the agency's recreation budget. This total includes approximately \$39 million for use of developed recreation sites such as campgrounds, cabins, visitor centers, and picnic areas; \$14 million in fees for reservation services provided through recreation.gov; \$11 million from recreation special use authorizations, primarily for outfitting and guiding and recreation event permits; and \$2 million from the sale of America the Beautiful—the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass (the Interagency Pass).

Because REA repealed the recreation fee provisions in the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act and Recreational Fee Demonstration Program statute, REA is the sole recreation fee authority for the Forest Service. Without REA or some other fee retention authority, the agencies will face serious ramifications in terms of their ability to provide recreational services and facilities to the public. REA must be reauthorized at least 1 year before it expires to allow continuity of the Interagency Pass Program and recreation.gov, since the Annual Pass and Military Pass components of the Interagency Pass are effective for 1 year, and reservations on recreation.gov are made up to 1 year in advance. Other operations affected by the timing of reauthorization of REA include ordering, sales, and distribution of passes and the annual photography contest for the Annual Pass.

The Interagency Pass Program introduced both the Military Pass in 2012 and more recently the 4th Grade Pass in support of President Obama's "Every Kid in a Park" initiative. The Military Pass recognizes the sacrifice of our active duty military members by providing a free annual pass to members and their dependents. Every Kid in a Park strives to get every 4th grader to visit federal lands and waters. The 4th Grade Pass helps by providing free access to these youth and others with them to all sites that charge standard amenity recreation fees or entrance fees. The Forest Service intent is to reach 50,000 youth through this program in 2016.

National Forest recreation services and amenities are important to local communities for quality of life, economic growth, and job creation. Any disruption in the level of funding for developed recreation sites would impact local jobs and purchases at local business establishments. Recreation fee revenue is leveraged in partnership with communities, recreation groups, non-profit organizations, and others, often doubling or tripling the value of the dollar collected. Recreation fee revenue is often used to support seasonal employment, youth-oriented work, and volunteer opportunities. Sites maintained for recreational use are also often used to support environmental education in local classrooms. These benefits would all be lost if REA is not reauthorized.

CHANGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

We have listened to our visitors and have made changes in our approach to recreation fees. The Forest Service has a comprehensive public involvement process to introduce new recreation fee sites and fee changes in compliance with REA. This process was developed in response to years of working with recreation users, Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (Recreation RACs), local communities, and concerned citizens to provide the public with sufficient knowledge to understand proposed new fee sites and fee changes and adequate opportunity to comment on the proposals.

Since 2005, the Forest Service has submitted approximately 1,470 recreation fee proposals to Recreation RACs. The vast majority of these proposals were for fee increases at campgrounds operated by the Forest Service, but the proposals also included new or increased fees for cabin rentals and day use sites and elimination of fees at some sites. After deliberation, Recreation RACs recommended proceeding with all but approximately 30 of the proposals. The Forest Service also requires all administrative units to meet standards for public outreach and generate yearly reports on recreation fee revenues and expenditures.

In addition, as of 2012, the Forest Service has fully implemented a modernized point-of-sale system to enhance customer service and accounting of recreation fee revenue. This system modernizes and streamlines the financial process.

CONCLUSION

Continuation of REA is critical to the Forest Service's and other federal land management agencies' recreation programs. REA has enabled the Forest Service to provide consistently excellent recreational experiences at sites across the United States. REA has strengthened the connection between visitors and the lands they cherish by requiring that the fees they pay benefit the sites where the fees are collected. Thousands of projects, large and small, have been supported by REA fee revenues since 2004.

REA facilitates efficiency, consistency, and good customer service by enabling interagency cooperation and public participation.

The Interagency Pass Program requires significant up-front investment to design, produce, and ship the Annual Pass each year. Reauthorization of REA before it expires, would allow this program, as well as recreation.gov, to continue in a cost-effective manner and without disruption of visitor services.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Forest Service's implementation of REA and its critical importance to recreation opportunities on federal lands. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.